a vigil and a verdict

the murderer of an Atlanta attorney is acquitted of all charges

words by Craig Washington

On March 22, 2003 Atlanta organizers held a candlelight vigil in downtown Marietta to protest the acquittal of Roderquis Rashad Reed, who was charged with the May 2001 murder of Ahmed Dabarran, a 32 year-old closeted black gay man originally from Somalia. Dabarran was a highly respected Fulton County assistant attorney. Reed bludgeoned Dabarran to death in his sleep and admitted to taking his victims car and cell phone afterward yet was acquitted of all charges.

The charges included malice murder, felony murder, aggravated assault and theft. The organizers considered the Cobb County trial a mockery of justice that was manipulated by the use of the "gay panic" defense. Vigil organizers highlighted not only the defense team's tactics but the abject negligence and homophobia displayed by the Cobb County prosecutor Tom Cole. Steve Koval who convened the vigil committee days after the Feb. 28 verdict, told attendants, "Ahmed (Dabarran) was victimized three times, once by his brutal murder, a second time by the disgusting lies his murdered told at the trial...and finally by the justice system which he served so faithfully."

Among the speakers were Faisal Dabarani, Dabarran's brother and Holly Hughes, a colleague who is prosecuting the highly publicized hate crimes case against a Morehouse student charged with beating another student with a baseball bat last November. The event included performances by Adodi Muse, the self-described gay Negro ensemble and the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus. Fulton County Assistant DA Tamarra Ross recited a wrenching poem.

The Promise
Will somebody speak for me
Will somebody tell of the joy with which I lived
The compassion I shared
The dedication with which I served
Will somebody please speak for me
Fifteen blows to my skull
I can speak no more.

At the trial Reed's attorney Vic Reynolds stated that Reed, a 21 year old black man, and Dabarran met through a chat line. Dabarran invited Reed to a party at his apartment "where there would be lots of girls." A friend of Reed's testified that after Reed arrived at Dabarran's apartment, Dabarran and an unidentified man were playing "homosexual porno tapes." Reynolds said that when Reed objected, Dabarran performed oral sex on him at gunpoint. Reed admitted to hitting him in the head with a pot after he had fallen asleep after drinking rum for hours in order to escape. The Cobb County medical examiner testified that Dabarran had been hit 15 times with a blunt object and that his skull was beaten into his spine. His decomposing body was found in his apartment three days later after colleagues alerted Cobb police that he was missing.

In his closing argument Vic Reynolds offered the following paradoxical portrait of Dabarran. "By day an educated, articulate, felony prosecutor, a married man. The other side of a coin is a man who was on chat lines with teenagers, who frequented gay bars, who preferred street males. A man who picked up other men – a life of deceit. That lifestyle had an effect on my client." The gay panic defense is a commonly used defense attorney's strategy crafted to manipulate anti-gay biases embedded throughout the system and society to justify their defendant's victimization of gays and lesbians. It has often been successfully employed to ensure the acquittal of perpetrators whose guilt appears unquestionable. This device is in many ways an adaptation of tactics used to defend lynching, racist police brutality, and the rape and abuse of women. The defense attorney underscores those acts and characteristics of the victim that are associated with negative stereotypes historically assigned to the victim's

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race, sexual orientation and/or gender. Empathy and culpability are transposed as the jury is swayed to identify with the defendant. Assignation of guilt is transferred from the perpetrator to the victim, and empathy is retracted from the victim and bestowed upon the perpetrator.

Several followers of the case claimed that prosecutor Cole failed to provide a competent case. In an apparent attempt to negate Reed's self-identification as heterosexual, Cole told the jury, "(Reed) appeared to be a diligent son during the day, but in the wee hours of the morning he's talking about partying with two homosexuals." Ironically, Cole's re-presentation of Reed closely resembles Reynold's Jekyl and Hyde depiction of Dabarran in its implicit indictment of homosexuality. Cole continually mispronounced Dabarran's name, and with the exception of Dabarran's brother failed to enlist his colleagues as character witnesses. The medical examiners report contained information contradicting the defendant's claim that Dabarran drank heavily before falling asleep that night yet Cole inexplicably failed to introduce such evidence. Sandra Pope, a former police officer and close friend of Dabarran observed, "It was painfully obvious to those who watched the trial unfold in Cobb County that the lead prosecutor became paralyzed by his own homophobia, freezing not only his objectivity, but his ability to act. Apparently the violent murder of a young, gay, black man in Cobb County was not worth the deliverance of justice." In an interview following the verdict Reed's mother Carolyn Reed-Hicks said, "I don't think the jury had anything against gay people. If a person chooses to be gay, that's his choice. But you don't impose yourself. Some men just hate that."

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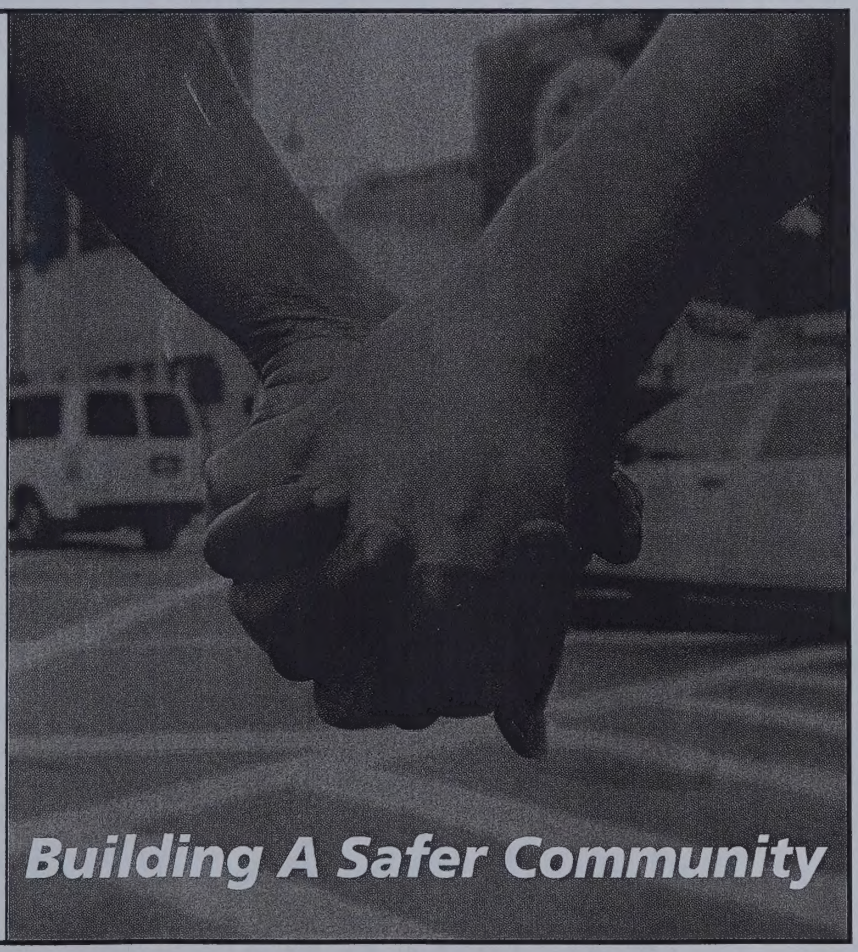
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